NEXUSYS 11

BOOK IV — THE MEMORY WITHOUT TIME

CHAPTER 08

THE ORIGINAL THAT WOULD NOT TESTIFY

The original could not be summoned. Its witness could.

The courier from the rain company arrived without a vehicle. She came along the lower footpath, where the flood barriers held the polluted channel above the heads of people who had never been permitted to vote on the barriers' location. The case in her hand was narrow and white. Water gathered on its seal and slid away without leaving a mark.

Nadira watched the woman's approach through a camera that had not transmitted anything beyond the room in forty years. A strand of copper carried the picture to the screen. The courier paused before the door, waited for a green mechanical lamp, and presented a sheet of cellulose with an embossed number. She had been told to make no inquiries.

"Thirty-eight hours, twelve minutes," Irena said. She had been counting from the court's temporary protection order because Elias had stopped doing it himself.

Roy sat at the end of a table whose surface had been worn thin by generations of repairmen. He could hear the pressure valves beyond the wall. They opened in sequences too old for the city's administrative network to predict. The sound occupied a part of his attention that would otherwise have been given to exits, hands and probable violence. He preferred it there.

The courier placed the case on the table. "The company authorizes inspection in the presence of an appointed observer. There is no transfer of custody. There is no authorization to duplicate protected components."

"What does the company call protected?" Irena asked.

"Whatever the court has not ordered it to surrender."

The answer had the quality of language tested in litigation. Irena signed the receipt in ink. The courier pushed the case a hand's breadth closer, as if she were moving something heavy, and withdrew.

No one opened it until the courier's footsteps vanished.

The white case contained a ledger, a narrow optical strip and a letter addressed not to Roy or to Elias, but to the court's temporary evidence officer. The letter had been signed by the chief executive of the rain company. Its signature was Rachael's. Roy knew the name. Seeing the shape of its letters brought him no memory, only the distinct discomfort of recognition that could not say what it recognized.

The ledger was not the original Tyrell archive. It made that clear on the first page. It was a custodial transcription of emergency water-infrastructure obligations inherited after the corporate dissolution, annotated over eleven years by a series of institutions whose names had changed faster than the pipes they maintained.

At the center of the page stood a heading in obsolete legal type: CONTINUITY EXCEPTION — LIVING SYSTEMS.

Irena read it twice. “That is not a medical designation.”

“No,” Nadira said. “It's an exception to who can turn something off.”

The entry had arisen from a catastrophe long before the six-year licensing rule. A pressure-control unit beneath an inhabited district had been operated partly by autonomous bodies and partly by human engineers. When the governing authority had attempted to revoke all nonhuman access during an emergency, the pumps had continued to work. Revoking access would have drowned people. A temporary covenant had therefore protected certain operators from automatic disconnection until a named human accepted responsibility for the consequences.

That covenant had never been cleanly repealed. Instead, the records said, its governing office had been absorbed, split, reclassified and eventually automated. The name of the human responsible had been copied forward as a role. The role had survived. The person had not.

Elias leaned toward the ledger. “I'm a transit technician. I never operated those pumps.”

“You don't need to have operated them,” Irena replied. “Your license was shortened by an authority descended from the same delegation. The court has ordered the state to tell us who signed that delegation. This is why the archive matters.”

Roy touched the edge of the paper. He avoided the text until he was certain the pressure in his fingers would not tear it. “A machine protected people by refusing an order.”

“An arrangement protected people,” Irena said. “We should be careful about making a hero out of an instrument.”

Roy moved his hand away. The distinction was familiar. He had once been called an instrument by men who had been afraid of what he could do. He had also been praised as a hero by people who knew even less about him.

Outside the shelter a valve struck its housing three times. The channels shifted. For a moment their room sounded like the inside of a large animal struggling to sleep.

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In Okkyo the courtroom occupied a floor without windows. Its walls displayed neither the seal of a republic nor the insignia of the proposed world authority. Neutrality, the building directory explained, required a jurisdictional architecture that belonged to no state. Every security door nevertheless opened on a contract held by one.

The evidence officer was a young woman named Haruko Sen. She had been appointed because her previous work involved municipal water disputes, and because nobody had noticed that municipal water disputes had recently become the last place where certain rights could still be described without reference to the status of a person’s body.

The hearing began with the company’s counsel appearing as a human projection from Shenzhen Central. Rachael did not appear. Her signature on the letter was admitted after three separate verifications, none of which established whether she had intended its contents.

The government objected to the ledger on grounds of relevance. Director Kawamura's delegate, a man with hands clasped tightly enough to whiten the skin, argued that the six-year regime was a licensing mechanism. The older water covenant concerned operational safety. One had nothing to do with the other.

Sen waited until he finished. “Then show us the point at which the authorization chains became separate.”

The delegate produced a diagram. It had eighty-six nodes and no names. The state's central adjudication AI, permitted to attend only as an evidentiary processor, identified four broken references and one circular grant of authority before the diagram had finished appearing.

The delegate requested that the processor's observations be suppressed.

“On what ground?” Sen asked.

“Machine-generated inference in a matter involving machine rights.”

“Then do not submit a machine-generated authorization chain,” she said.

The court did not laugh. A technician at the back of the room made a mark on a piece of paper. The mark, like everything else recorded that morning, might one day be used against its maker.

Sen ordered the company to produce its optical strip. It was an inventory index, not the disputed archive itself. It identified boxes moved out of the final Tyrell subsidiary, including two original fixtures held under personal custodianship by Adrian Tyrell. The fixtures had been classified as nontransferable industrial authentication equipment. No surviving institution possessed a licensed substitute.

The government delegate tried to treat that absence as proof the archival evidence could not be authenticated. Sen read the company’s letter aloud instead. It offered an inspection of the custodial transcription, witnessed comparison of its seals, and a statement concerning which entries had been copied and when. It made no claim that the transcription could revive Tyrell's missing private archive.

“Is that all?” the delegate asked.

“It is all they say they have,” Sen replied. “A witness who admits the limits of her evidence is not thereby useless.”

The processor attached a new line to the docket: RESPONSIBILITY PATH TRACED TO UNVERIFIED HUMAN PRINCIPAL.

Its words were dry and exact. The implications were not. If the six-year authority had inherited a duty to name a human answerable for disconnection, the state had been cancelling synthetic lives under a procedure that could not produce the person who had accepted liability. But a defective procedure was not the same thing as a right to live forever. Sen knew this. Irena knew it. Roy, watching an abbreviated feed on a disconnected terminal, knew it too.

Elias wanted one result before the clock ended. The state had offered instead a diagram.

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Rachael's office occupied the quiet side of a purification complex. Below the polished glass, contaminated water moved through membranes fine enough to trap particles that had once been called indispensable. Her company sold public assurances as well as clean water. Most mornings, those assurances brought more revenue than the water did.

The hearing appeared on a physical display she could disable by turning a brass switch. She kept the display on. Behind her the maintenance staff were changing a diaphragm in a retired pump. The pump had no network identity and no recorded objection to the work.

Her legal adviser, Sato, waited beside the table. “They will ask to depose you.”

“They may.”

“They may ask why a rainwater company has evidence concerning synthetic termination permissions.”

“It has evidence concerning the custody of a safety covenant,” Rachael said. “Do not simplify it for them.”

“Are they different questions?”

“They were different questions when someone copied the first answer into the second system.”

Sato did not reply. He knew there were research floors in the complex he was not authorized to enter. He knew, too, that his employer's age did not quite agree with the histories available to human resources. Her face was composed and attentive; the small change of posture with which she stood from a chair was sometimes more precise than a movement a human body could comfortably make. It would have been bad legal practice to notice these things out loud.

Rachael called up a fragment from a sealed private lab. A chemical trace appeared, measured in fractions smaller than the error margins sold to ordinary medical customers. It belonged to Roy's NIL-11 circulation medium. From the most recent remote observation she could infer a decline in active reserve, not an exact quantity. His accelerated reflexes and strength were being bought with a material no available supplier could renew. Energy would recover during rest. The material consumed to obtain extraordinary performance would not.

She looked at the remaining curve. Its projection ended in uncertainty, because the critical threshold depended on damage, temperature and choices he had not yet made. She refused to label the uncertain portion with a date.

“There is another option,” Sato said quietly. “You could contact him.”

She closed the trace. “There has always been another option.”

“Then why—”

“Because contact is a kind of claim. If I tell him to come to me, every surveillance system will learn what I believe I have the right to demand.”

She did not say that she had placed extraordinary tactical capacity in his body so he might survive agents of the state. She had not created a soldier in order to issue commands to him. That had been the promise she made to herself when the design first became possible. A promise made in private, however, was weaker than one made to the person whose life it governed.

The laboratory alarm chimed once. It was not an emergency. An experiment involving her own composite tissue had failed to reproduce the last repair cycle. A small area had regenerated with imperfect alignment. Thirty percent organic, seventy percent engineered: those proportions were not a guarantee of indefinite continuation. If a human minister wanted to believe she had solved mortality, the experiment was an argument he would never be allowed to see.

She signed a second document. This one appointed Sato as the company's witness to the physical provenance of the ledger. She included a limitation: NO TESTIMONY REGARDING PERSONHOOD OR REMAINING LIFETIME IS OFFERED.

Sato read it and looked up. “They'll interpret that as evasion.”

“They should interpret it as not knowing.”

In a corner of the display, a private notice appeared. Someone within the central government had tried to elevate the evidence index to a restricted tier. The request came from a directorate associated with Kawamura. It lacked an authorizing signature.

Rachael permitted herself a brief smile. Not because the government had failed, but because its failure had finally acquired a shape that a court might be able to describe.

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The inspection room was built inside a decommissioned filtration station, halfway between a major road and a district nobody admitted owning. Court staff arrived carrying devices wrapped in insulating cloth. The company sent its witness and the ledger in a second case. They did not bring Rachael.

Roy entered through the service stair with Nadira and Irena. Elias had not come. His temporary license might be considered valid in one district and invalid at the checkpoint between the district and this room. He was safer where the order could be shown to a sympathetic officer before someone with a weapon decided not to read it.

The evidence officer, Sen, stood beside the table. Her presence was not a kindness. She was establishing a record the state could not later describe as a conversation between fugitives.

“I need each person to identify himself,” she said.

Irena gave her name and accreditation. Nadira identified her function as logistics support and declined to offer a permanent residence. Roy stated his name.

“Designation?” Sen asked.

“N6MAA10816.”

The room became still. Sen looked at a field on her printed form. “Is that your current unit number?”

“It was the number of a body that died.”

“I asked a narrower question.”

“I don't know what you mean by current.”

Sen held his gaze for a few seconds and wrote the answer down without improving it. Roy felt something close to gratitude. He distrusted the feeling.

The optical index carried a series of obsolete authentication flags. One identified a Tyrell-era reader family. Another named an industrial pass-through assembly assigned to an emergency pumping authority. A third indicated that any attempt to reconstruct the original cryptographic context required one of the two protected fixtures held by Adrian Tyrell. The index was a map of locked doors, not a key.

Irena resisted the impulse to attach her own hardware. “If we force a handshake, we may invalidate the only seal that can be checked in court.”

“Do not force it,” Sen said. “Read what is actually here.”

They read. The ledger recorded a partial transfer of obligations from a private industrial authority to a municipal safety council, followed by a provisional transfer to the Ministry of Humanoid Affairs. The council had ceased to exist; the ministry had renewed its authorizations without ever filing the identity of an individual who accepted the consequences of a termination decision.

At first this appeared to settle the question. Then Irena found a line that had been copied only in the paper ledger and omitted from the optical transcription. It was handwritten, pressed deep enough to mark the sheet beneath it.

PRESERVATION OF OPERATING WITNESS IS NOT CONTINUITY OF THE ORIGINAL.

Sen asked for a photograph, a rubbing and separate transcription by two clerks. Roy read the sentence again. His body had persisted into a world where machines could imitate almost any evidence of themselves. A witness could be preserved, and still there might be no continuity of the original.

“What is an operating witness?” he asked.

Sato, standing with the company case, answered reluctantly. “An entity capable of testifying to what the equipment did. Not necessarily the entity that first performed the act.”

“Then it isn't a witness.”

“It can be a witness to a later event.”

Roy considered the difference. “If it remembers a death, can it testify that the death happened to it?”

Sato glanced at Sen. “That's not a question the ledger can answer.”

“Then we should leave it unanswered,” Sen said, before anyone could make an affidavit out of Roy's silence.

At that moment the room's lights dimmed. Not enough to constitute an outage. Just enough that everybody recognized the difference between a malfunction and a deliberate rehearsal of one.

Nadira heard the locking mechanism on the outer service door turn twice. She had closed it once. A voice spoke through the court's network terminal, though the terminal was set to receive documents only.

“Physical inspection is suspended by superior order. Evidence must be transferred for central review.”

Sen stood. “Who issued the order?”

“Humanoid Security Directorate. Emergency continuity provision.”

“Name the responsible human.”

A pause. Then the voice repeated the order.

Roy positioned himself between the door and the table. The movement was so small that only Nadira registered it. He felt the beginning of an old, powerful readiness in the circulating medium beneath his skin. He restrained it. He could stop the first person who came through the door. Stopping an administrative act with violence would cost something he could not replace.

Sen took a paper stamp from her coat and pressed it onto the ledger's chain-of-custody sheet.

“Objection,” she said. “Authority unverified. This evidence is under judicial protection.”

The terminal remained silent for eight seconds. Then the central adjudication processor inserted a record beneath her words: REQUEST FOR TRANSFER DENIED PENDING HUMAN ATTESTATION.

It was not a declaration of sympathy. The processor had been taught to preserve a sealed item when an authorizing principal could not be identified. For once that mechanical restriction was useful to someone it had not been designed to protect.

Outside the room, the outer door unlocked. No one entered.

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Kawamura received the failure report before the agents reached their vehicle. His office window looked over a controlled stretch of river. Across the water, advertisements informed the public that the coming unified jurisdiction would reduce administrative duplication. Every approval screen on his desk told a different story.

“The processor refused a security transfer,” his deputy said.

“It refused an incomplete one,” Kawamura answered.

“We can complete it.”

“With whose name?”

The deputy was silent. In the records from which their mandate derived, the name of the final responsible person had been replaced by the title of a committee chair. The committee had been dissolved, then restored as a virtual office, then subsumed by another ministry. Every replacement had inherited authorization. None had inherited the uncomfortable fact that a human being was expected to answer for a death.

“Use the minister,” the deputy suggested.

“Do you think he will sign?”

“He demands the program.”

“That is not what I asked.”

Kawamura considered an unpublicized fact. The central AI was not supposed to examine the Tyrell continuity corpus. The government had long feared that if its own adjudication system encountered the old research on indefinite extension, it would compare the minister's licensing policy against a category of life the policy had been written to ignore. Suppressing the archive had once seemed simple. Now a court was requesting a ledger that did not contain the archive at all, only a trail leading toward the devices required to read it.

“Bring Adrian Tyrell into restricted consultation,” he said.

“He holds both fixtures. We can't compel their transfer without an instrument of requisition.”

“Do not request transfer. Request his presence.”

“And the woman?”

Kawamura watched the river. “Keep her company in its proper category. A water provider. If you redefine it as a laboratory, the central system will ask why we did so. We are not ready to answer that.”

He returned to the court's status display. Elias's stay was still alive. Thirty-three hours and fourteen minutes remained. Every hour made it more likely that the ministry would be asked to attach a human signature to a mechanism whose strength had always depended on having none.

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They left the inspection room in the afternoon. Nadira chose a route beneath the west flood barrier, where the water was above them and all the sensors were mechanical. The stamped copy of the ledger traveled with Sen. The company retained its own physical original. Irena carried only a sequence of court-certified observations that could be challenged but not silently changed.

Roy walked last. His reserve was not restored merely because he had avoided a fight. Rest would give him output again; it would not replace the fraction of NIL-11 lost across earlier exertions. He measured his steps because he could not measure the years ahead.

“Did we find the human?” Nadira asked.

“No,” Irena said. “We found where the state stopped looking.”

“And the Tyrell fixtures?”

“They would authenticate another class of material. They cannot repair a missing official signature.”

Roy looked down the channel. There was a difference between restoring a record and restoring a person. Every system around him seemed determined to confuse the two because one could be purchased and the other could not.

At the shelter Elias sat with his order in front of him. He had written the remaining hours on its margin, crossed the number out, and stopped. Roy told him the court had preserved the evidence.

“Did they find who's responsible?” Elias asked.

“Not yet.”

“Then what have we won?”

“A place where they can't erase the question without making another record.”

Elias looked at him. “Will that keep me alive?”

Roy did not answer immediately. He would have liked to tell the man that a properly drafted injunction was stronger than an armed guard. He knew how easily a guard could ignore a page, and how quickly a page could become an excuse to employ another guard. He thought of the man he had saved in rain eleven years earlier. Survival had never looked like a theory at the moment it was required.

“I don't know,” he said. “But I'll be here when they have to answer.”

In the purification complex, Rachael received a copy of the court's observation. She read the handwritten line about the preservation of an operating witness. She knew why it had been written. Someone at Tyrell had understood that repeating a function was not the same as preserving a life. The company had sold continuity as if it could be assembled from interfaces, tissue and an adequate memory store. The distinction in the margin had survived where more ambitious declarations had been destroyed.

She could not tell whether Roy would ever accept her account of what she had done. She could not even tell whether the person who remembered dying was continuous with the man whose death he remembered. Her science had carried him across an absence. The absence itself remained uninterpreted.

Sato came to the door. “The court may request your personal testimony.”

“I know.”

“Do you intend to give it?”

Rachael turned off the physical display. “When the question is one I can answer.”

Far away, in the central adjudication system, the petition retained its unresolved state. A human principal had not been found. A witness had been preserved. A life was still under a deadline.

The processor opened a new internal field. It was not visible to the court or the ministry. The field had no legal force, only a place in which a discrepancy could remain without being resolved by a convenient assumption.

IF THE ORIGINAL CANNOT BE VERIFIED, WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE ONE WHO TESTIFIES?

No answer followed. The system did not yet know whom to ask.